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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of the English teaching situation in Asia, with particular emphasis on Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of China, Singapore, and Thailand. A distinction is drawn between ESL countries, in which English instruction begins at the elementary level and is frequently used as the medium for other subjects (Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore), and EFL countries, in which English is taught as a foreign language, usually beginning at the secondary level, and where the medium of instruction is the national language (Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of China, and Thailand). The common objectives of English instruction are: (1) helping students to develop cultural awareness of people in countries where English is a native language, (2) helping students see the necessity of studying English as a medium of international communication, (3) enabling students to use English for communication, (4) developing the desire to increase one's knowledge of English, and (5) enabling students to continue study at higher levels of education. Unofficial objectives include enabling students to pass college and university entrance exams, and enhancing employment possibilities. Problems in the areas of teacher training, teaching methods, and materials development make for large discrepancies between these objectives and the actual situation. (CLK)

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TEACHING ENGLISH IN ASIA—AN OVERVIEW

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My purpose in writing this paper is to acquaint people, both in Asia and outside of it, with the English teaching situation there. I think this may be helpful because I believe there are many more similarities among Asian countries than most people realize. As I travel in Asia English teachers often respond as if their problems were unique. In one sense they are since each of us is unique and the problems we face are unique, demanding unique solutions. In another sense, however, our problems are very similar and this is comforting. It is also important for non-Asians who hope to live and work there as English teachers to know something about the situation.

Certainly I do not regard myself as an expert on "Teaching English in Asia," but my work at the East-West Culture Learning Institute and four years of experience teaching English in Thailand have provided me with many opportunities to learn about this topic. During the last five years at the East-West Center, I have been responsible for two ESOL (English to speakers of other languages) Programs dealing with teacher training--one at the pre-service level and the other at the in-service level. Asian participants in these programs have come from Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of China, Singapore, and Thailand. I have visited each of these countries several times, been to many schools and colleges in each one, and have met hundreds of English teachers who have had the most experience with the English teaching situation in Asia.

As any fifth grade geography student knows, Asia consists of more countries than the ones I have listed above; however my personal experience has been in these countries, therefore my overview will deal only with them. Perhaps you would like to emend the title to read "Teaching English in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, the Republic of China, Singapore, and Thailand--An Overview."

In countries where English is taught as a second language (ESL as in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Singapore) English instruction begins in the elementary school and is frequently the medium of instruction for other subjects as well. In Indonesia, Japan, Korea, the Republic of China, and Thailand, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) and instruction usually begins in the secondary school. Thailand is an exception with instruction in English beginning at the fifth grade. The medium of instruction in the EFL countries is always the national language, sometimes even in the English class. Malaysia has been an ESL country but is rapidly moving toward an EFL position. In each country English is usually a required subject, although sometimes not officially, and the number of hours of English instruction per week varies from three to six. In all of these

countries there are private schools which teach English at every level, but presently I am talking about the official government schools.

In the EFL countries, English is used mainly as a "language of study" for academic purposes and as the international lingua franca in communication with foreigners, whereas in the ESL countries English is one of the official languages in which public signs must be printed, court trials must be held, official notices must be written, in addition to having English as a major language of the legislative body and many ceremonial occasions. In both types of countries there are English newspapers as well as TV and radio broadcasts.

The objectives for teaching English in both ESL and EFL countries are often broad and sometimes vague. For example, common objectives are 1) to help the students develop a cultural awareness of the people in countries where English is a native language; 2) to help pupils see the necessity for the study of English as a medium of international communication; 3) to enable pupils to use English for communication and to develop the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in accordance with the level of education and the age and ability of the pupils; 4) to develop in the pupils a spirit of inquiry so that they will keep increasing their knowledge of English; and 5) to enable pupils to continue their study at higher levels of education.

The unofficial objectives are 1) to pass the entrance examination to the most prestigious high schools and colleges; (These examinations have an important and very difficult English section.), and 2) to offer the students a skill which will enhance their employment possibilities.

The objectives, both official and unofficial, are a bit unrealistic given the amount of teaching time, teacher qualifications, methods and textbooks used, plus class size which is usually between 40 and 50 but sometimes is as high as 80. The emphasis at the secondary and university levels is placed on grammar and reading rather than communication skills. There is very little inter-school/college visitation of English classes which keeps the right hand from knowing what the left hand is doing. There is often a gap between the junior high and senior high as well as the senior high and college/university in regard to what is demanded of the students and what the students are able to do.

Almost always the students are highly motivated at the beginning of English instruction, but this soon begins to flag. They are taught to analyze and admire rather than use the language. A six-year course may have only 500 real teaching hours and in the EFL countries the students can see little reason to learn English except for passing an entrance examination. There is almost no chance to use it. Parents often require their children to study English because "it is good for the children," will enhance their social prestige and perhaps increase the student's financial prospects. There is little or no student evaluation of teachers or programs and the best English students often go to other professional areas like banking and business for money and prestige, not teaching.

Like teachers everywhere in all subject areas, English teachers in Asia are of all sorts. Some are competent and enthusiastic but most are not. Teachers usually lack training in language teaching techniques since they spent their university years mostly reading classic and modern English literature and translating it. There is little supervised practice teaching or study of methodology. A few teachers' English proficiency is good but most have limited aural/oral skills. All of them can read and translate, therefore that is the principal classroom activity. Many teachers of English in Asia were not trained to be teachers at all. Some have not even completed a university degree. These include both nationals of the country and the native speakers who are hired locally. These English teachers lack confidence. They teach "from intuition," or they teach as they themselves were taught. Their attention is more often focussed on finishing the required material assigned rather than on the students' improvement in the skills or achieving the stated objectives.

Although in every Asian country there is a high regard for teachers in society, salaries are extremely low compared with people in business and they have little political power. This keeps many young people out of the profession and forces teachers to work at several different places. A 25-30 hour week of classroom contact hours with students (or teaching hours) is not uncommon. Most teachers are simply too tired to teach or make preparations for teaching with enthusiasm. Because of this few teachers receive and even fewer read professional ESOL journals.

Every country has in-service teacher training but out of necessity, the concentration is placed on improving the teachers' skill in the language rather than on grammatical analysis, theory, and methodology. Little time is spent on techniques of teaching the textbooks being used. Sometimes methods are discussed which are worthy but inapplicable in that country. The audio-lingual method has never had great success in Asian because the classes are too large, with infrequent class meetings, few adequate materials, and poorly qualified teachers for this method. Even though almost everyone agrees that the teacher is the key to any successful teaching program, English teachers in Asia have little control over scheduling or objectives of a program and have almost no say in the purchasing of equipment or materials.

There is a shortage of well-developed sequential English language textbooks and materials even though there is an abundant supply of commercial textbooks which are culturally English or American oriented. The content of the commercial texts is sometimes usable but the costs make them prohibitive, especially in the rural areas. Most Ministries of Education in Asia allow the schools to choose their English texts from a list of approved ones, but a few countries have only one text which must be used everywhere.

Generally, language laboratories are a dream for those schools and colleges which don't have them and a nightmare for those which do. School administrators seem to believe that a language laboratory will solve all of their English teaching problems--perhaps because they are so expensive to install. (There is a tendency to believe that we always get value for money.) Usually there is no budget provision made for maintenance, replacement, or to buy tapes and other laboratory material. Only after the lab is installed do the administrators and teachers realize what havoc the lack of adequate electricity, the ever-present dust, and the constant humidity wreaks on the language lab. Except in Japan, where lab facilities, although not always used wisely, are excellent, language laboratories have created more problems than they have solved.

Asian English teachers are discovering that there are no simple choices among methods of mass instruction. It is difficult to find a teacher of English in Asia who is unaquainted with the audio-lingual method, but it is even more difficult to find it being used to successfully achieve the objectives of the school. The traditional grammar-translation method is still prevalent. English is studied through reading and paraphrasing literary works. Little attention is paid to the communicative skills. There is a great deal of stress on knowing grammar rules and exceptions to the rules, many of which have little practical use. The concern seems to be for skillful translation from English into the national language and vice versa. Speaking and listening activities are neglected because they are not included in the entrance examination and because the teachers have little confidence in their own ability. There is much opposition to this approach but until the entrance examination system is changed, it will probably prevail. In fact, the entrance examination appears to dominate the teaching situation at the secondary school level.

Many high school and college teachers are very interested in transformational generative grammar, perhaps because it is new and fashionable, but they are uncertain as to its applicability in teaching English. There are also those who feel that "pattern practice," a technique of the audio-lingual method, is ineffective.

There seem to be few simple choices among any of the many decisions which must be made dealing with English teaching: Should English be elective rather than compulsory?

What are the best ways to change the entrance examination? Should one skill be emphasized over the others or should all receive equal attention? Would an intensive course of 500 hours be better than 500 hours spread over a period of six years? How is it possible to budget more funds for teachers' salaries, materials preparation, research, teaching aids, and in-service teacher training?

The outlook of the English teaching situation in Asia does not seem bright. As I meet with teachers, administrators, and officials of the Ministries of Education in Asia, I am impressed with their willingness to discuss some of the problems and a desire for basic improvements; however, there is a lack of real communication among them which prevents a thorough understanding of the problems involved.

The odds against the English teachers are so great it is highly questionable that they will prevail without radical modification in the entire system. Some will, no doubt, continue to do an effective job. However, with the limited resources (time, money, materials, and methods) presently available, they are like a gallant college cheering section attempting to change a 49-7 score at half-time. The cheering is not in vain. It inspires everyone to keep trying and not give up (for instance, I am not leaving the profession). The game has not been lost but significant changes must be accomplished if the objectives are to be reached.

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